

# The Poet's Friend?

## A Jab at the Youthful William Dean Howells

by James L. Murphy

**W**ILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS, in his reminiscences of his early years in Columbus, Ohio, paints a pleasant picture of youthful bonhomie and Bohemia, composed with evenings of theatre-going, newspaper-writing, oyster dinners, and shyly admitting to the beautiful Kate Chase that he cannot dance. His portrait of Columbus during the years 1858-1860 displays a pleasant, quiet, almost idyllic existence with few shadows other than the ominous forebodings of the coming War Between the States, and Howells's recollections seemingly concentrate on "the more smiling aspects" of the equally youthful young capital city.<sup>1</sup>

There is some slight evidence, however, that Howells's sojourn in Columbus had occasional darker moments, that his reminiscences written some half a century later were selective, if not at times somewhat ingenuous. As a case in point, the elderly Howells admits to his youthful folly of stuffing his *Ohio State Journal* column, "News and Humors of the Mail," with foreign phrases and translations, in this manner:

I confess the pride felt in the poor little Spanish, German, and French which it had cost me so much to acquire unaided and unguided, and I was willing that my acquirements should shed luster on the newspaper I loved almost as much as I loved myself. I admired it even more, and I wished to do all that I could to make it admirable, and even enviable, with others. I think now that I was not using one of the best means to do it; I only contend that it was one of the best I could think of then. If any contemporary had turned it against us, I hope I should have been willing to suffer personally for it, but I cannot now be sure.<sup>2</sup>

Though Howells, in old age, professed to be uncertain whether any contemporary had misgivings about his zealous use of the foreign phrase, it is clear that at least one reader of the *Ohio State Journal* was perturbed enough to underscore the point in a sharp parody of a Howells poem. Originally appearing in the author's first book, *Poems of Two Friends*, coauthored with John James Piatt and published in the winter of 1859, "The Poet's Friends" received greater notice when it appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* of February 1860:

### THE POET'S FRIENDS

The Robin sings in the elm;  
The cattle stand beneath,  
Sedate and grave, with great brown eyes,  
And fragrant meadow-breath.



*William Dean Howells*

They listen to the flattered bird,  
The wide-looking, stupid things!  
And they never understand a word  
Of all the Robin sings.

This was quickly transformed, in the Columbus *Ohio Statesman* of 14 February, 1860, into the following:

From the *Oceanic Monthly* for February, by special permission of the Publishers.

THE POET'S FRIENDS.

An owl set perched on the limb of a tree,  
Dismally hooting up at the moon;  
The "stupid cattle" all gathered to see  
What in thunder could mean such a tune.  
The owl screeched out, "'tis a beautiful *song*,  
But asses cannot appreciate it."  
"Your song," said they, "is in some heath 'nish tongue,  
"Why the devil don't your *translate* it!"

Duo Amici

The signature of the parody, "Duo Amici", is an obvious reference to Howells's book of poetry, and the "owl" in question was clearly Howells. Less obvious is the identity of the author of this sharp parody. Although Edwin Cady reprinted the parody in his biography of Howells, he mistakenly attributed it to an

anonymous member of the *State Journal* staff.<sup>3</sup> Actual authorship of the parody can now be identified, on the basis of a newspaper article appearing some 23 years after the poem. The reminiscences of O. B. Chapman, a member of the Ohio House of Representatives during the 1860s, attribute the parody to “a printer by the name of Laurens, who excelled as a writer of satirical poetry” and who, “it so happened . . . did not like Howells.” Chapman concludes his account by noting that “Of course all Columbus laughed at the joke, with the single exception, perhaps, of Howells; but the latter even showed his appreciation of its point by ever afterward refraining from any attempt to air his linguistic lore in that community.”<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to judge the accuracy of Chapman’s assessment of the effect of this incident on Howells, for only three more numbers of “News and Humors in the Mail” were published after the appearance of Laurens’s parody. None of these included any foreign phrases, although the column of 15 February 1860 contains a remarkable example of the youthful condescension that may have been a goad for Laurens’s attack. Headed “Incredible Flunkeyism,” Howells’s paragraph notes the dismissal by the Harper Brothers of Howadji Curitys [*sic*], “the brilliant essayist and lecturer — one of the most successful literaturers [*sic*] of the day . . . editor of the ‘Easy Chair’ of the *Monthly*,” dismissed by the Harpers — “always the meanest of toadies” — for his anti-slavery and progressive opinions. “This act of pitiful persecution cannot, of course, enhance the virtue of Mr. Curtis’ writings, but it will endear him personally to the North. But who, after such flunkeyism on the part of the Harpers, will buy one of their publications?” Perhaps Howells never did buy another Harpers publication, but one can only wonder if “the Dean of American Literature,” who would eventually earn this title while occupying that same Harpers “Easy Chair,” ever had occasion to recall these words and reflect upon the irony of his youthful censure of Harper & Brothers.

More to the point, though Howells seems nowhere to have ever referred directly to A. B. Laurens, it is clear that Laurens’s shaft hit home, for in his latter-day reminiscences, *Years of My Youth*, Howells, in speaking of his friendship with *Ohio State Journal* editor James M. Comly, refers to this poem:

We had never a moment of misgiving for each other, yet I had one bad moment over an Atlantic poem of mine fabling the author as a bird singing in a tree, and flatteringly but unintelligently listened to by the cattle beneath, which the title of the piece typified as “The Poet’s Friends.” The conceit had overtempted me, but when I had realized it in print, with no sense meantime of its possible relevance, I felt the need of bringing myself to book with the friend I valued most, and urging how innocently literary, how most merely and entirely dramatic the situation was. I think my anxiety amused him, as it very well might, but I still draw a long breath of relief when I remember how perfectly he understood.<sup>5</sup>

Though Laurens's parody was in no way connected with the demise of Howells's column, and though Howells was certainly not laughed out of town, that Laurens's poetic jibe did create some pain in the sensitive young man is easily imaginable. That it did cause Howells some discomfiture is clear from his reminiscences a half century later.

The actual reason for Laurens's dislike of Howells remains unknown, and little else is known of Laurens. Born in Virginia, 9 August 1819, of French descent, Laurens was a printer by trade, working variously as a job printer, as a master printer at the State Deaf and Dumb Institute, and as a printer at the *Home Gazette*, a Columbus temperance newspaper.<sup>6</sup> That he did have some literary pretensions of his own — reason enough, perhaps, for him to dislike young Howells — seems clear from the small volume of poetry which he published in 1873. *Bubbles*, however, does not include the parody of Howells's "The Poet's Friends," nor does it exhibit many traces of the sharp wit with which Laurens once skewered the young William Dean Howells.<sup>7</sup>

#### NOTES

1. W. D. Howells, *Years of My Youth*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1916.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 146-7.
3. Edwin H. Cady, *The Road to Realism: The Early Years of William Dean Howells*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1956, p. 69-70.
4. Columbus, *Ohio State Journal*, 1 January 1883, p. 1.
5. *Years of My Youth*, p. 228.
6. Record of interment, Greenlawn Cemetery, Columbus, Ohio. U. S. Federal Census, Columbus, Franklin County, Ohio, Entry 1097, Ward 3, p. 193. 1880 U. S. Federal Census, Columbus, Franklin County, Ohio, Enumeration District 29, p. 14.
7. Laurens, A. B. *Bubbles*, Columbus, Ohio: published by the author, 1873.

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